

LOVED ONE



novel

AISHA MUHARRAR

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Aisha Muharrar

VIKING

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For Ben

ONE

There was no bride. There was no groom. No seating chart with my name in calligraphy—a blue dot next to *Julia* indicating a preference for fish. No DJ coaxing guests to the dance floor with a multigenerational crowd-pleaser, no maid of honor fiddling with a sheet of white printer paper, unfolding it from eighths to fourths, then taking a theatrical deep breath before she says, *Okay! So.*

Which made sense because it was not a wedding.

But there were approximately a hundred of us gathered at Berkeley City Club, a grand Italian Renaissance Revival building often rented out for private events (like weddings), and there were two sections of dark wood folding chairs separated by a wide stripe of hardwood floor (an aisle if you will), and more important, it just *felt* like it should have been a wedding. It's what we did that year. We went to weddings. Not together—though Gabe did ask, the year before, when the invitations went out and before he'd started dating Elizabeth, if I'd be his plus-one to the Tokyo wedding of his percussionist and backup vocalist. They'd met on tour with him. I would have loved to go to Japan, but I already had another wedding on the same day. By September, I'd been to six and RSVP'd to three more. I was thirty—Gabe, born the same year but in December, was twenty-nine—and apparently we'd entered that stage of life where if you haven't nailed down your version of semiformal cocktail attire, you'd better do it quick because that's what your weekends were going to be for the next decade. This perpetual wedding season was such a well-known truth about people our age that I could feel an awareness of it in the room as I stood up, clutching my own folded sheet of printer paper, and began to speak about my dear friend

Gabe. It was one of the things I had to avoid saying in Gabe's eulogy—the obvious thing—that he was only twenty-nine, and his death was so sudden, by anyone's estimation, it would have been more likely I was speaking at the happiest day of his life.

My dear friend Gabe. This was the one line I'd prepared and now I'd said it. I'd hoped to come up with more by the time I arrived at the funeral. In my studio as I packaged orders. On the flight from LA, the car ride from the airport. But no, nothing. I lowered the microphone, stalling for time, and tried to remember how I was supposed to feel about Gabe. Outside, UC Berkeley students chatted on the street below us, cars and trucks drove along the city's concrete hills. It was a beautiful cloudless day.

"Gabe was the kind of friend who was more like family," I said. This was true. Having briefly dated as teenagers, when we met again in our twenties, we became friends so quickly it was clear we worked better that way. And we'd remained close for years.

"I could always count on him," I continued, launching into one quickly delivered anecdote after another to prove this point. As I scanned the faces in front of me—mostly Gabe's music associates and peers, plus both sides of his family: his father, his cousins, the aunts who'd flown in from Colombia, and his mother and her relatives and friends—I was sure none of them could tell, but I knew there was a disconnect between the words I was saying and what I was feeling. Not because I was in shock or numb. Though I probably *was* both in shock *and* numb. And not because the stories weren't real. I had plenty of examples of Gabe being sweet and constant.

Of course it would never have been painless, giving that eulogy. But it should have been easier.

The problem was even though Gabe was one of my closest friends, the month before, we'd made a dumb mistake and slept together.

AN IMMEDIATE AND IMPORTANT CAVEAT: Gabe and I were actual friends. I won't mention this again, because then the lady doth protest too much, but the point has to be made. We weren't the kind of friends who were never really friends. The kind of friends you see in a romantic comedy where there are two incredibly attractive people who are deeply emotionally invested in each other, and we're supposed to believe they have never once considered the idea of sexual intercourse. The kind of friends who are secretly in love with each other and only realize minutes before one of them is about to get married or leave town, and the next thing you know they're jumping in a car, or on a horse, or running down the street, *whatever*, and they tumble into bed, or out of frame, depending on the rating of the movie. Having several male friends, this depiction of male-female friendship was always a pet peeve of mine, but somehow Gabe and I had tumbled (onto a couch, not a bed, but then, yes, eventually a bed too), and we'd ended up in this exact ridiculous situation, except we'd done worse than that because we hadn't even gotten a stolen honeymoon or new zip code; we'd just made a real, and awful, mess of everything.

But—you may be thinking—there's always a chance to make things better. Even if it gets really bad, if you're truly good friends, then you can work it out. And absolutely, totally you can. Unless, three weeks later, one of you dies.

—

“OH, JULIA, HE *LOVED* YOU.” The first person I spoke to after my eulogy was Gabe's manager, Kathy Liu. We were in the restroom. It was small, with two narrow stalls and two side-by-side sinks. Kathy was middle-aged, probably closer to my mom's age than mine. She was wearing a Tina Turner concert tee over a long-sleeved black dress. Gabe's mother, Leora, had asked that instead of the usual funeral garb, in honor of Gabe's career as a musician, we wear our favorite concert tees. I'd chosen a Billy Joel's *The Stranger* shirt

(an inside joke for no one but the deceased) under a black tuxedo jacket. It was clear Leora wanted Gabe's funeral to be a departure from traditional mourning and as much of a celebration of his life as possible. His producer and frequent collaborator Jabari Bernier was currently leading a twenty-minute musical tribute with a jazz quartet. *A time of reflection* is what it said in the program. A time for a bathroom break is how several people interpreted it. I'd avoided the long line for the women's room and found an empty restroom downstairs. Well, empty until Kathy walked in. She hugged me, then took a step back, concentrating with concern as if she were appraising car wreckage.

"He just adored you," Kathy said, clutching my hands in hers. "I remember we were headed to a show in Houston, and he kept saying, 'Julia's going to be near here. You have to leave some time so I can see Julia.' And I said, 'Okay, where's Julia staying? Which hotel in Houston?'"

I knew this story. Kathy had told it to me before. She was one of those people who connected with acquaintances by continually reminding them of the single experience they shared, imbuing an anecdote with dramatic reverence, as if it were Kerri Strug's Olympic vault or some other monumental event worthy of its own ten-part docuseries. Now finally we'd reached the episode about the dismount.

"And *then* he said, 'Oh no, Julia's staying in *Austin*.' Austin! I said, 'That may as well be a different state, honey.' But I got him there. So sweet."

I had once found this story sweet too; now it was, at best, proof that Gabe was terrible at state geography.

Kathy rested her funeral program on the edge of the sink. *Gabriel Wolfe-Martel, 1986–2016*. "I'm sorry we couldn't reach you directly, our priority was Leora."

"Of course," I said. I'd found out the same way everyone else had. Through the internet. I was at a workbench in my studio, tightening the prong setting of a bespoke ruby ring, the chain nose pliers gripped between my thumb and index finger. Mandy, the new production manager for my jewelry line, was at her desk.

Mandy had only worked for me for a few weeks, but we'd hit it off instantly after realizing we'd both grown up the only Black girl in a mostly white suburban school. There was often an immediate bond with other onlies, a shared interest in things that would probably go on some ill-conceived this-is-for-white-people list that we'd come by honestly and early before realizing those things weren't made with us in mind. Somewhere Mandy had a photo of herself with her all-white soccer team and somewhere I had a similar picture; we got each other. But we hadn't known each other that long, and it can take some time for me to open up to people, which is why it wasn't her fault when she looked up from her laptop and gasped. "Wait, don't you know one of the guys from Separate Bedrooms?"

"It's just Gabe," I said. This was a common mistake. Separate Bedrooms wasn't a band of four or five guys, it was a stage name for one person.

"Oh," she said, her voice tentative. "People are saying he, like, died?"

Kathy pulled a handkerchief from her purse. A handkerchief. You didn't see those too often. I pointed to it. "Am I going to need one of those?" I was sort of trying to make a joke, sort of genuinely afraid. I'd never been to a funeral. Which I knew at thirty was lucky. Though it's hard to feel lucky at a funeral.

"Oh yes, dear," Kathy said. Her face softened into a maternal tenderness. "You may not feel it yet, but at some point, it will hit you. And then you'll be back to normal, talking to someone, just like we are now, and it will hit you all over again. Grief comes in waves." She patted my shoulder. "You let me know if there's anything I can do."

There was something Kathy could do. What I'd realized I needed as soon as I entered the bathroom, ironic because I'd purposely avoided the long line of women waiting for the upstairs restroom and was now on my own. "Do you have a tampon?" I asked.

She didn't. ("Oh, darling, I'm menopausal!") I checked the bathroom tampon dispenser, but of course it was empty. Or broken. Either way, nonfunctional. (Had anyone ever seen a functional public restroom tampon dispenser?) I searched my bag again, then ducked into a stall. I was in there,

preparing to make a toilet-paper-constructed menstruation nest, when someone walked in and entered the other stall.

“Sorry, excuse me? Do you have a tampon?” I asked.

“I do actually,” a voice said in an English accent. The stalls were the type where you could see the feet of the person next to you. In this space, a woman’s hand, long fingers with short, unpolished nails, appeared. A tampon in the palm. It was the European kind, no applicator. I took it from her, and as I did, I noticed a large statement ring on her index finger, a garnet in a silver setting.

It wasn’t unusual for me to notice the pieces people wore. But it wasn’t the first time I’d seen this ring. I knew that burgundy oval, the chunky cigar band. But from where? Then with a mental click, a memory popped it into place like a bone reset.

It was from Gabe’s texts. A selfie, and in the corner was a woman’s hand—with this ring—on his shoulder. I was pretty sure it was his most recent ex-girlfriend. I’d seen other pictures of her too. She was white, a brunette. What was her name? They’d dated off and on for a year. She lived in London and Gabe had moved in with her at the end of his European tour.

I took the tampon. “Thanks,” I said.

“Of course,” she replied. “Just make sure I get it back.”

Funny, I thought. Given the day’s events, it was the equivalent of me guffawing.

When I exited my stall, she was at one of the sinks. Kathy had left her funeral program balanced on the edge. Between us, Gabe looked up. Sitting on some steps, leaning forward, his forearms on his knees. His black hair spiked up away from his face. A slight squint, like the sun was in his eyes.

I turned on the faucet of the other sink, glancing over to confirm her identity. Reddish-brown hair, wavy and just past her shoulders. A strong jawline and the kind of skin I’d heard pale friends complain resisted a tan. Taller than me. A statuesque womanly figure that I, still waiting for a growth spurt, had never possessed. She was wearing a black wrap dress. Great boobs, I thought. Nice pull, Gabe.

She turned toward me. Elizabeth! That was her name. And it was definitely her. Her eyes narrowed, I assumed because she was trying to place me.

I extended my hand. “Elizabeth, hi. We’ve never met. I’m—”

“You’re Julia.” There was an abrupt downshift in her tone, her words a shove. As she pulled a paper towel from the dispenser, she said, “I know who you are. I know exactly who you were to Gabe.” Then she walked out, tossing the crumpled paper into the trash as she went.

I stood for a moment, dazed. I didn’t go after her. In the same way you wouldn’t pursue a bear after it mauled you or pick up a sizzling-hot pan that had just scalded you. It was how she’d said it, like an accusation, but also with total confidence, like she already knew everything.

When I left the restroom, there was no sign of Elizabeth. I walked into the assembly room where I’d given my eulogy. The jazz quartet was playing a fizzy party anthem from the third *Separate Bedrooms* album. People mingled, talking softly. I scanned the room for a tall Korean man in a Fiona Apple shirt. Finally I spotted my friend Casey. Long face, warm eyes, the perfect posture of a man who’d put a lot of time into core training. He was standing in front of a diamond-paned window. When I caught his glance, he and his fiancé, Will, a thin, wiry Black man who was never without his round-frame glasses, headed over to me. The three of us met in the middle of the room, facing the quartet. We were silent, our usual conversation topics paused. What would we have been talking about if we weren’t at Gabe’s funeral? The headlines of that summer: the election, Zika, more takes on Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, the swimmer who’d been accused of lying about being held up at gunpoint at the Rio Olympics. Our own lives: Will was training to become a therapist, he’d recently completed an intensive graduate study program and was now a supervised intern. Casey was a lawyer at the LA office of a big global firm. He could never tell us the specific details of the cases he was working on, but he *would* share how stressed he was working seventy hours a week on them. Then I’d talk about a professional nuisance of my own, like the frustration of invoicing (why could not *one* outlet I worked

with remember to pay on time?). There were so many things that had been on my mind before I heard about Gabe, but now I didn't have the energy to discuss even one.

Instead I listened to Jabari conclude his tribute. I smoothed over a crease in my shirt. Casey put his arm around me. He'd never really had his own friendship with Gabe, but they'd hung out a ton when we were younger, usually in groups with me; Will had met Gabe once. If it weren't for me, they probably wouldn't have been at his funeral. I'd told them they didn't have to come, but now I was glad they were here.

After the tribute, one of Gabe's uncles announced that those of us who'd been asked ahead of time should head to the cemetery. Only I'd been invited, so Casey said he was going to take a quick work call and then he and Will would meet up with me later. He went to find a quiet spot for his phone conversation, which left me and Will alone.

"How are you?" Will asked.

"Okay," I said.

We walked out of the building onto the front steps. Most people were either still inside or heading to the cemetery. Kathy had said she'd give me a ride there and I was waiting for her. Will was watching me—I think hoping I'd say more, maybe give an honest response to his question. He wasn't like me and Casey, content to keep communication light, packed with nineties pop culture references or a tally of what we were currently watching. We liked to tease Will about his failure at small talk, his instinct to search for the hidden hurt in everyone. Always hopeful for a transformative breakthrough, he spoke in eighth-grade Earth Science terms: *metamorphosis*, *energy*, *capacity*, *a shift*. When he asked *how are you*, he genuinely wanted to know. And maybe it would help, I thought. If I told him.

I said, "So Will, say you *were* hypothetically a therapist."

A proud look slid across his face. "Almost there."

"Right. So what would you say if I were your patient and I told you Gabe and I slept together?"

Will looked puzzled. “You did? Oh, from when you dated a long time ago?”

“No. We actually didn’t have sex then. I meant more recently.”

“How recently?”

“...Like a month ago?” I chuckled, awkwardly. “It’s actually pretty funny.” It was not at all funny. “Because then after that, I didn’t hear from him.”

“What do you mean?”

I spoke quickly. “We said we’d be in touch and then I texted him and called him, but he didn’t respond. And then he kept not responding.”

Will clasped his hands together and slid them down his forehead, across his head, his hair was buzzed to the scalp, just the impression of a curl. “That’s a lot.”

There was more. By the end I wasn’t too proud of my own behavior, though I blamed that also on Gabe.

“Does Casey know?” Will asked.

“No,” I said. “And please don’t tell him.” I’d considered this. Aside from Gabe and Casey, my other closest friends were my college friends Nneka and Rose. When someone said “best friend,” I thought of these four people as a group, even though they were not close to each other. I imagined telling my three remaining closest friends what had happened with my fourth. Nneka would listen, then give me a pragmatic summary. Rose would cry, somehow even more hurt than me. Casey would want to tie a big romantic bow around the whole thing. It was enough trying to figure things out on my own, I didn’t want to hear anyone else’s interpretation of events.

Which was why it was strange that I was *still* thinking about Elizabeth. Even after I left Will on the steps and drove with Kathy to the cemetery, I was replaying our conversation in the bathroom. Elizabeth had seemed so sure in her assessment. *I know exactly who you were to Gabe.* And I envied her certainty. For years I’d known exactly who I was to Gabe. It was a long story but I could tell it confidently, like a bartender sharing the recipe for her

signature cocktail. Now things were so jumbled up in my head, I had no idea where to begin.

The actual beginning would have to do.

—

TWELVE YEARS BEFORE, DURING A different summer, between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, I attended an arts and architecture program in Barcelona called the Hayes Emily Yarborough Summer of Art. It was founded by a painter named, you guessed it, Hayes Emily Yarborough. Hayes Emily had gone to Barcelona in his midforties and the art there had radically transformed his approach to his own work. But, he lamented, it was too little, too late. Lucky for him—and I guess lucky for me too because I received one of the program’s scholarships—he had family money and a generosity of spirit, and thus the Hayes Emily Yarborough Summer of Art was born. HEYSA was technically an arts education program for young adults, but both “young adults” and “arts” were broadly defined. There were twenty-five students total, ranging from high school to college and continuing adult education. As far as courses, there was art history and the architecture of Barcelona—expected standards that I, hoping to get college credit, signed up for—but there was also welding, feminist poetry, a class called Dance Memoir, and another that was dedicated solely to Picasso’s pieces created during the Spanish Civil War—if you so much as mentioned the Blue Period, you were asked to leave the classroom.

Years later, I saw Hayes Emily at a CFDA (Council of Fashion Designers of America) party in a sculpture garden. Three Calders and a Truitt away from me was a man in his seventies wearing a black tuxedo and black turtleneck. Hayes Emily often wore all black; he had tall, stiff white hair. There was a certain Andy Warhol thing going on (which he’d been criticized for, *New York* magazine quipping, “even his wardrobe is derivative”). I knew it might be my only chance to ever speak to him in person. I was wearing this

electric-blue minidress with a train twice the length of the dress, so I was running in heels, holding this cascade of silk in one hand and a champagne flute in the other, weaving through an obstacle course of passed canapés, runway models, and priceless artwork, nearly crashing into Hayes Emily in the process, all so I could say, “Excuse me? I went to HEYSA in Barcelona. You changed my life.” He replied, not at all shocked, “Thank you. I get that all the time.”

The weekend after the first week of classes, I was invited to a party at my art history teacher’s apartment. Professor Roberta Donnelly was one of the few teachers who wasn’t visiting for the summer, she was American but she lived in Barcelona full time. “She’s amazing,” I told my mom when I called home. I’d only ever had two Black teachers, so I knew my mom would find Roberta interesting for this reason alone. But then I went into specifics of how fascinating she was. Everyone agreed she was the best professor. It was rumored she’d partied with Basquiat, she and her ex-husband shared custody of a four-year-old, but more interesting to us art students, they also shared custody of an original Norman Lewis painting. Now, instead of an architect like Gaudí, I was thinking I’d become a professor like Roberta. I saw myself walking through the campus of some foreign university, wearing a chic tweed blazer with velvet elbow patches, carrying a brown leather satchel.

My mother stopped me. “Julia, you’re describing an outfit, not a career.”

—

ROBERTA’S APARTMENT WAS IN GRÀCIA. On the way from my student apartment near Plaça de Catalunya, I passed crowds of people drinking under the outdoor umbrellas of restaurants, smoking, laughing, but then gradually the streets quieted, it felt more residential.

I heard the party as soon as I stepped into the building—the rumble of a sound system, multiple conversations crushed together into sprinkles of indistinct chatter. By the time I reached Roberta’s fourth-floor apartment, it had quieted down. There were a few people clustered by the doorway. I waited for them to move forward, but instead they lingered, focused on what I now realize had grabbed their attention and everyone else’s at the party: “Through the Fire,” a slow melodic tune from the early eighties, by genius diva Chaka Khan. But it wasn’t genius diva Chaka Khan singing. Someone at the party was performing a cover. I knew the voice, I’d heard it before. Or at least I thought I had.

In a program focused on the arts within a city known for its architectural risk-taking, the uninspiring office building where we had our classes was a surprising visual dud. But the outdoor courtyard was lovely, with a few trees, some plants and flowers in coral-pink pots, a round concrete table where people gathered: students met between classes, the office workers took their smoke breaks, and sometimes people would perform. Fifteen minutes into the first lecture of my Architecture of Gaudí course, we heard someone singing outside. Our classroom didn’t face the courtyard, but with the windows open (there was no AC and it was June in Barcelona, so the windows were always open) we could still hear the outside world.

“Annie Lennox,” one of the older students shouted (he looked nearly thirty). He leaned back in his chair, proud of himself, as if we’d all been participating in this guessing game and he’d beat us to it.

At the time I didn’t remember the song was called “Why,” I just knew it wasn’t the famous one she did as part of the Eurythmics. “Why” starts out quiet, so we were probably too far away to hear the first part, and that’s why the song seemed to burst mid-chorus out of nowhere. Everyone paused, including our teacher. He listened, rubbing his mustache. “Beautiful, beautiful,” he said, momentarily enchanted. Then he clapped his hands as if that summed it up and returned to his lecture on Casa Milà.